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The Transgressive Figure of the Dancing-Girl-in-Pain and Kanai Mieko's Corporeal Text

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Introduction

What is literature? Who gets to determine its meanings and define its boundaries? How do these meanings interconnect and overlap with those generated through other forms of art? How can literature conceivably exceed its textual form, as black marks upon a white page, and become as *performed* as dance or theater? What are the implications for gender and identity when literature is re-imagined in these ways? This article examines these questions via a trope, often to be found in the writings of Kanai Mieko (1947–), of “the corporeal text” (*nikutai-teki na kotoba*), whereby a physical body, deemed possessed of a consciousness, becomes metaphorical for text and its relationship to and with the readership.¹

Focusing first on her essay “Nikutairon e josetsu dai-ippo” (Towards a Theory of Corporeality,” 1969), I aim to show how Kanai reads the dancing-girl-in-pain—a figure she discerns both in the writings of Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875) and in the *butō* performances of Hijikata Tatsumi (1928–1986)—as a metaphor for what she terms the “originary” nature of the body, and its ability to transgress its own boundaries through both literature and performance.² In a later essay, “Kotoba/genjitsu/nikutai” (Words/Reality/The Body,” 1984), she sets out to explicitly show how “the corporeal text” is an active text which continually manages to exceed its own limits and thereby, as I argue, arrives at a theory that literature, or text, is something which cannot be divorced from the act of reading.³ Indeed, Kanai’s redefining of text as something physical and living constitutes a profoundly subversive act and is transgressive on three fronts. Firstly, such a redefinition erases the boundary separating it from the other arts, overturning any notion of



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literature as being something abstract, self-enclosed, self-referencing, intellectual, and elitist (a conception which at least caricatures, if not characterises, the long-held assumptions of the mainstream, masculinist Japanese literati of the time). Secondly, Kanai's conception of text as something which is lived through the bodies of both reader and writer problematizes any implicit boundary separating the two and, in the process, dismantles their conventional hierarchical relationship. For Kanai, the reader's ideal experiential relationship with text is not that of a passive recipient, but one of an active, engaged creator of meaning. As we shall see through a brief textual analysis of "Funiku" (Rotting Meat, 1972), Kanai's evocation of the corporeal text invites the democratization of the production of literary meaning.⁴ Thirdly, Kanai's claim that such an active *female* body is the origin of all human experience and textual meaning—alongside her reappropriation and deployment of this trope in her early short stories—can be seen as a means of transgressing the limits imposed upon the female body in Andersen's texts, completely overturning their gendered implications.

Towards a Theory of Corporeality

Although Kanai Mieko made her literary debut in the late 1960s to some acclaim with a succession of avant-garde poems, novellas and short stories, her first major published essay, "Towards a Theory of Corporeality," has been consigned to relative obscurity. Nevertheless, by concluding—via a discussion of the dancing-girl-in-pain in both the folk stories of Hans Christian Andersen and the *butō* performances of Hijikata Tatsumi—that literature is not only experienced by, but also re-enacted through the collective bodies of the writer and the reader, her essay can be considered no less radical than her early poems and fiction in its presentation of the relationship between the body and the text.

Kanai's essay commences with a single statement which directly contradicts and problematizes, on three fronts, any conventional Cartesian understanding of the duality of mind and body (wherein the perceptions of the mind are considered superior in their reliability than those of the body) prevalent in modern discourses on the self, including modern Japanese literature:

"To physically know" (*mi o motte shiru*) is, in fact, the only way of knowing—by which I mean that the body is more than a sum of its functions; while we can each be certain that we possess our own

“bodies”—within which our existence is rolled up—it is the body that calls forth dreams and illusions.⁵

The primary assertion Kanai makes here is that body and consciousness are not discrete categories; rather, they are indivisible. The very phrase, *mi o motte shiru* to “physically know,” seems to suggest that there might be another way of knowing (that is to say, for example, to know through the mind); but here, Kanai denies such a supposition. The body, in Kanai’s essay, is the basis for understanding all human experience and, as the host and origin of all human functions and senses, is indistinguishable from the human mind’s experience of the world.

Furthermore, it is the body that, through all of its experiences, both painful and pleasurable, “calls forth dreams and illusions.” Indeed, Kanai’s essay goes so far as to argue that if there is no discernible distinction between the mind and body, and if “we are our bodies,” then we must also conclude that language and sexuality are also of the body:

When I write of “everything that is discovered through the body of the self”, “everything”, of course, includes language and sexuality. When I use words and when I behave, my body is always already there; thus I cannot conceive of splitting consciousness from the body.⁶

By claiming that one’s primary experience of language lies in one’s *use* of words, and that sexuality is rooted in our behavior, and that both therefore are dependent on physical acts, Kanai’s essay overturns any assumption that either precedes the body. Instead, for Kanai the body precedes those linguistic and socio-biological systems whose manifestation the body permits, thereby allowing what we might now term the “body-self” to interact with, interpret, and imbibe the world beyond.

The Little Mermaid

Secondly, implicit within this notion that body-mind-self are indivisible and that the body is fundamental to *all* human experience is the understanding that the body is the *origin* of the self. That the body somehow constitutes an “origin” is not, of course, a self-evident proposition. The very term “origin”—especially as it is known in modern discourses—carries within it a whole set of linear, teleological assumptions that, as we will soon discover, Kanai’s writings here (as well as elsewhere) explicitly write against and seek to subvert. In order to illustrate more precisely how the body can be considered an origin and

what implications this holds for the self, Kanai turns to Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid."⁷ She writes:

The Little Mermaid abandons that which is natural to her body—her fish tail—and exchanges it with human legs which cause her a pain that pierces her entire body when she walks. She does this in order to attain her love, or rather, because such love itself entails pain—it is not just because the Little Mermaid cannot live without love—such love comes simultaneously with the discovery of the body: it is love's leap.⁸

In other words, Kanai's essay not only notes how, in Andersen's story, the Little Mermaid's experience of love happens synonymously with her discovery of the body, but moreover it reads Andersen's story as an allegory for how the body can be understood as the origin of the self and all its experiences—including the experience of love. For Kanai, the story melds the notions of pain, love and the body, rendering the conventional dichotomy between the mind and the body untenable. Instead, the Little Mermaid's experience of the sensation of loving operates at what we might term the *limits* of her being.

On the one hand, it informs the first, child-like discovery of her own body when the mermaid, having relinquished her fish tail, walks or dances on her new legs: "Every step she took was [...] like treading on pointed tools and sharp knives but she bore it all willingly."⁹ For Kanai, this act of relinquishment, this "leap of love," is symbolic of the act of faith necessary in submitting the self to the physical experience of love, and specifically to the pain that this involves.¹⁰ Her receiving human legs and walking in them for the first time operates as a metaphor for the way in which (the act of) love constitutes "a discovery of the body":

It is not because the Little Mermaid wishes to live outside of love, but because the leap of love is synonymous with a discovery of the body, that in order for the mermaid's love to be fulfilled, or rather, because love itself connotes pain, she abandons that which is natural to her body, her fish tail, exchanging it with a pain that pierces her entire body in order to receive human legs and walk. [...] Through the experience of walking step by step in excruciating pain [...] the mermaid's love finally brings her before death.¹¹

Love, then, is an emotion which provokes physical sensations (in this case, the sensation of excruciating pain). Accepting Kanai's conception of the body-self, however, allows us to reformulate this sentence: physical

sensations (such as the sensation of excruciating pain) permit the understanding that one is experiencing the emotion called love. And it is this understanding that allows us to see how the term “origin,” mentioned above, comes to acquire a resonance or meaning whose temporality has to be redefined as being *cyclical* (hence a constant presence), rather than *linear* (hence an absence belonging to, and deriving from, a single, past moment). Each time the mermaid puts her foot upon the ground she endures the physical experience of love anew. This constant, eternal re-experiencing of love, as though each time were the first time such an experience has occurred, constitutes a never-ending cycle of constant re-understanding of what it means to love, which in turn necessarily functions as a constant originary, child-like act of beginning to experience and/or understand.

On the other hand, however, this act of loving, as a constant cycle of originary experiences is also the cause of, and reason for, not only her death, but, crucially, of her *physical understanding* of that death. Writes Andersen: she “threw herself from the ship down into the sea, and felt her body dissolving into foam.”¹² The moment of her death is not, for the mermaid, marked by a ceasing of consciousness of being; rather, it manifests itself as a physical experience of dissolution. As Kanai writes:

From love, we have no means of escape. It is a kind of meeting with otherness; the significance of our acquaintance and its true meaning to us is only revealed at the very end (*kyokugen e iku made*, lit. ‘until we reach its furthest limits’). And it is there, at the very end, that the origins of the ancient, romantic, yet eternally incomplete dream, are relinquished. Which is to say, we die of love.¹³

Kanai’s essay thus presents Andersen’s inscription of love as an exemplar of originary experience, wherein “origin” is, as we have seen, a re-occurring physical event, which manifests itself as a constant presence. If we examine and analyse further the inscription of love as exemplifying a cyclical originary experience, it becomes apparent that it is driven by three main factors: the first is the disassociation, or alienation, of the self from the body (represented, in Andersen’s story, by the mermaid’s abandonment of the fish tail); the second is the concomitant (re)discovery of the body as origin (represented, as noted above, by the mermaid’s appropriation of human legs and her act of walking on them); and the third is the inevitable progression each step takes towards our death. Love, as an enactment of originary experience, is thus equivalent with the

rediscovery of the self, and is therefore not so much a “retrieval” of a past origin or moment, but instead signals the creation of a new (or, more specifically, *renewed*) awareness or sense of love which is born simultaneously with the “return” to that origin and the rediscovery of the self. However, the new origin and hence our “return” to it—like each experience of walking on sharp knives—ends as soon as it takes place.

Hijikata Tatsumi and *Butō*

The third challenge to Cartesian dualism posed by the essay’s opening statement is Kanai’s assertion (as an example of one of the ways in which the body can be conceived as being *more* than the sum of its functions) that it is the body which “calls forth dreams and illusions.” In other words, the body is able to transgress its “physical”/“material” boundaries through its generation of dreams, illusions, fantasy, and fiction. In order to more clearly illustrate the body’s capacity to do this, Kanai turns the discussion onto Hijikata Tatsumi’s performance of *butō*.¹⁴ She begins her discussion of *butō* by widening her observations on “The Little Mermaid” to include other stories by Hans Christian Andersen. She notes that:

[In Andersen’s stories] the act of stepping corresponds unmistakably to the pain of being on the earth: whether the act of walking on legs which sends pain all through [the Little Mermaid’s] body; or the pain of tramping down nettles with bare feet which Princess Elisa endures; or the girl who finally has her feet cut off after being consigned to dance for eternity because she put on the red shoes.¹⁵

The motif of the young woman walking/dancing-in-pain occurs not only in “The Little Mermaid,” then, but also in Andersen’s other stories of “The Wild Swans” and “The Red Shoes”; and it is this motif of the woman dancing in pain which, Kanai writes, informs the *butō* performances of Hijikata Tatsumi.¹⁶

Butō (or, as it was originally termed, *ankoku butō* [the dance of utter darkness]) was developed by Hijikata and Ohno Kazuo (1906–2010) in the late 1950s and early 1960s.¹⁷ To achieve its aims, and to explore its own philosophical pre-occupations, *butō* departed from other dance traditions and movements, such as ballet, classical Japanese dance, and contemporary dance. As Klein states: “*Butō* choreographers had no compunction about regarding these traditional dance forms as a kind of treasure trove of technique, gesture, and principles, which could be appropriated without regard to their original context or meaning, stripped

down, and transformed into *kata* (a vocabulary of movement patterns).”¹⁸ While sometimes parodying and mocking the stylized movements of these other dance traditions, *butō* thus nonetheless resisted all classificatory labels, seeking to avoid the crystallization of a consistent, formal style of its own in favor of wild, improvisational, and unexpected moves and positions. Klein writes “[a]lthough many of these movements and gestures had quite specific meanings within their own traditional context, those meanings were stripped away in the appropriation process, becoming unintelligible (or unreadable) to the viewer.”¹⁹ These magpie-like acts of cultural appropriation then achieve a philosophical coherence. Accordingly, as Miryam Sas argues, *butō*, as an art form, shares some of the preoccupations of Japanese surrealism. In particular, she contends, they both strive for an

anti-conceptual search for a terrifying limit-moment, a breakdown of symbolic systems—the moment of approach to actuality and the body, which they conceive in paradoxical and unexpected ways. Both movements [...] aspire to effect a radical decentering of conventional systems of thought and consciousness, a rupture of existing symbolic frameworks. By varying means, they work to reach a space of “(sur)reality” or “actuality” beyond socially defined boundaries of understanding.²⁰

Here, as Sas later explains, “actuality” connotes “the existent pain of reality” which was considered by Hijikata and other avant-garde artists to be glossed over by mainstream culture, and the banalities of the humanistic discourses that underpin and inform it, and therefore kept hidden from the average, television-watching Japanese consumer.²¹ By reaching a space of “actuality” through performance, *butō* was contrived to deliver society the shock of “terrorism” or “scandal,” or “the pleasure of a bloody nose.”²²

Returning to Kanai’s essay, we can see how she explicitly links the various princesses and mermaids of Andersen with the performances of Hijikata. Specifically, she discerns in the *physicality* of Hijikata’s performance—and by “physicality” we might explicitly mean the indivisibility of the dancer’s body from the dance—the same originary presence that she finds in the mermaid’s act of loving/being/dancing:

Anyway, these women’s strange power and their roused bodies are connected inside of me and can also be read in some of the specific movements of Hijikata Tatsumi’s dance. Our initial response to

Hijikata's body is to the decisive power displayed in the way his ribs stick out. [...] The moment he appears on the stage, we have no choice but to hold our breath and take in his strange appearance. [...] [H]e appears standing before us like a demon etched with all the pain that the body suffers. In this moment, the specific visual experience of Hijikata's peculiarly honed body imparts to the audience's bodies a feeling of indescribable pain; and so this phantom-like body's violent invasion of the audience commences.²³

In this passage, Kanai seeks to convey how both Andersen's stories and Hijikata's *butō* performances inscribe or enact what we might term "originary pain" and how origin, or originary pain, is able to transmit across the perceived boundaries that are conventionally considered to separate the dancer or writer from their audience, manifesting itself as a physical experience, or presence, among them.

Kanai's text makes it apparent that this notion that performance (particularly performance which explores the limits of being and evokes existent pain) is able to transmit physically transformative experiences, ultimately rests on an understanding of the body-self, not as a discrete entity in fundamental isolation from the environment around it; but, rather, as one which is enmeshed within a wider matrix of bodies and selves, which intersect across performance spaces. For instance, her statement that "these women's strange power and their roused bodies are *connected inside of me* and can also be read in some of the specific movements of Hijikata Tatsumi's dance," suggests that Kanai conceives of the body as a physical meeting point in a vast web of bodies, selves and texts.²⁴ In other words, through the transgressive figure of the dancing-girl-in-pain, Kanai's essay articulates a radical understanding of both body and text in which the body, as an origin of self, serves as a template for text, and the two are seen to intersect with each other across performance spaces. As such, the figure holds profound implications for our re-understanding of literature as a shared, collective endeavor, which continues to live through us; evolving and changing as we do, existing physically, moment to moment.

The Corporeal Text

It is the very notion that our bodies are physical meeting points in a vast web of bodies, selves, and texts which connects the dancing-girl-in-pain motif to Kanai's later concept of "the corporeal text," which she defines

in her 1984 essay, with its ostentatiously Barthes-like title, “Kotoba/genjitsu/nikutai” (Text/Reality/The Body):

By “the corporeal text”, I refer not to the contents of a written piece, but to text which is incessantly turned towards the “exteriority” of text; that quietly slips through the limits (which so many people point out: *the limits of words*); text that faces towards the “exteriority” of that which is written and read, as a complete corporeal experience. [...] Text itself has a body, and it is particularly text that relentlessly attempts to exceed its own body that is very corporeal in nature.²⁵

In Kanai’s metaphor, the writer, reader, and external texts are elided together, becoming indistinguishable from each other. However, they reveal themselves by constituting the *limits* of text. The corporeal text “slips through the limits”; in other words, it interacts with the body of the reader through being re-read and rewritten. By being re-read and re-written by different generations, cultures, and in different contexts, the corporeal text takes on new meanings, exceeding the boundaries of its initial denotations and connotations. The reader, writer, and a plurality of external texts thus all give the text its own “exteriority.” The very fact that the corporeal text is “turned towards the ‘exteriority’ of texts,” suggests that Kanai’s active physiological textual bodies open themselves to the reader, writer, and external texts. In other words, they invite questioning, comparison, and re-writing. Through such activities, the limits of the corporeal text continue to be exceeded with each re-reading and re-writing, and that which once was “exterior” keeps shifting. Therefore, the corporeal text must twist again to encompass new boundaries, to facilitate new ways in which it is read and written, packaged and conceived, to locate new meanings for itself, to rewrite itself.

By now, it should be apparent that Kanai’s conception of the corporeal text might be fruitfully considered in conjunction with the literary-theoretical terms that it most resembles—Barthes’ notion of the “writerly” text:

In th[e] ideal text the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend *as far as the eye can reach*, they are indeterminable (meaning

here is never subject to a principle of determination, unless by throwing dice); the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language.²⁶

The writerly text demands the reader's active engagement, offering many opportunities for the reader to intervene, to interpret, and therefore to create one's own "text." It is "*ourselves writing*" in a "perpetual present," it is an embodied entity, a set of signifiers and signifieds whose meaning at any given moment is contingent on its readers/rewriters.²⁷ Barthes draws a parallel between *the plural text*, which is a composite of many other texts, and which therefore cannot ever be considered "complete," offering as it does multiple interpretive possibilities, and *the reader* who is also a "plurality of other texts," whose identity can never be fixed, predicted, or determined in advance by the text, and to whom, therefore, there can never be ascribed any definite, locatable origin.²⁸ Thus, unlike Kanai, rather than describing text as embodied or as corporeal, he describes the human subject as encoded by and within an infinity of codes.²⁹ Both Kanai and Barthes, then, posit the existence of a kind of text which transcends or exceeds interpretive boundaries, which forces its readers to interact with it, and which cannot be reduced to a singular signification. However, there is a difference between these two conceptions of the writerly/corporeal text, a difference due in part to the semantic possibilities afforded by the Japanese language itself: as Japanese noun formations denote both the singular and the plural, in writing of "the corporeal text" (*nikutai-teki na kotoba*), Kanai is able to signify a variety of meanings simultaneously. A given noun often stands not only for a thing and that thing in its plural form, but also for the constituent parts *of* that thing: for instance, the term *kotoba* would usually be translated as "word" or "words," but, owing to the composite nature of the Japanese language, it can also signify larger components "a whole text" or even "texts" (hence the uncountable noun text was preferred in translation as it similarly denotes this range). Similarly, *nikutai* (body) refers not just to the body singular and bodies plural, but also to its fundamental constituent, *niku* (flesh). The term *nikutaiteki na kotoba* (the corporeal text) thus makes use of the composite nature of language in general, along with its ability to interconnect concepts, to form whole conceptual structures which themselves interconnect with larger and smaller structures, simultaneously growing outward or contracting to its smallest semantic constituent part. Indeed, one might argue, as the French

terms for text (*texte*) and subject (*sujet*) do not imply their construction from multiple parts, Barthes has to point out their fractured, plural, compositional nature whereas, for Kanai, such an implication is already present in the terms that she chooses.

Kanai's conception of the text as a body has one more advantage over Barthes' "writerly" text, however; and this is its ability to stress the transmediality of a given text. If text is corporeal, then reading is not a process of deciphering codes; rather, it is a physical act in which the written word passes through the eye into our bodies, affecting us emotionally, creating resonances with us through our encounters with other texts and bodies. Thus, at the moment of reading, the corporeal text is a thing *performed*. Both Kanai's discussion of the dancing-girl-in-pain and corporeal text demonstrate that literature cannot be separated and distinguished from other artistic genres, including dance and theater: the corporeality of the dancing girl moves through them all.

Examples of Corporeal Textuality in Kanai's Fiction

This article commenced by arguing that the corporeal text, challenging as it does the conceptual discreteness of the categories *text*, *body*, and *mind*, also problematizes conventional practices of reading and writing: the creation of a corporeal text is, to reiterate, a deliberate act that is designed to transform the reader from passive recipient to active participant in the creation of literary meaning. What, then might such corporeal textuality actually look like? How might we begin to enumerate the textual strategies that work to produce and facilitate the reader's participatory function in the creative process? And, more specifically, are there textual instances of the trope of the dancing-girl-in-pain in Kanai's fiction? If so, what are its implications in terms of gender representation?

Addressing the latter questions first, let us examine this trope further by recalling Kanai's description of it, as women who possess a "strange power" and have "roused bodies" (*tsukiugokasareru nikutai*) which evoke existent pain. The term, *tsukiugokasareru*, which I have translated as "roused," more literally means "to be made to move from being penetrated by something sharp" and almost perfectly evokes the experiences of Andersen's women. Indeed, Andersen's women's bodies (and specifically their legs) suffer the repeated pain of being penetrated by knives, pricked by nettles, and, in the case of the girl in "The Red Shoes," irrevocably severed—imagery which unmistakably suggests figurative rape and mutilation. However, we may note, while it is the men (the princes and

kings) who determine the fate of these women, it is the women themselves who *elect* to undergo such suffering, even entering into pacts of silent complicity—often having been tricked, or enticed by other evil women—in order to gain the love of the man they desire.³⁰ Thus, Andersen’s narratives re-present male violence on women’s bodies as female violence on women’s bodies. Moreover, they eroticize such violence by eliding these women’s experience of the pain of being penetrated, cut, or mutilated with their experience of *love*. Taken together, then, in terms of their representation of gender, Andersen’s stories are problematic: they aestheticize the repeated rape of the desiring female body; they narrativize the young female’s inevitable collusion and complicit silence in that act; and render any male violence indirect and/or incidental.

Re-read in this way, the trope of the dancing-girl-in-pain can be understood as metaphorical for “origin,” not just in its rediscovery of the body through physical suffering (as discussed above), but also in being the site of *rape*.³¹ As such, this trope, despite its immediate appearance as an active and desiring female body—a body, as Kanai puts it, which is “stepping [...] on the earth”—is also an abject, liminal, genderless site wherein the male phallus is obscured from view but implied in the sensation the women feel of being stabbed or pricked. The evocation of such a trope in and of itself, however, does not inevitably work to install the kind of masculinist erasure of female voices and male violence of Andersen’s narratives. Indeed, in their re-appropriation and deployment of this trope, Kanai’s early writings can be seen to exceed the boundaries of its denotations and connotations in the Andersen texts, thereby completely overturning their gendered implications.

For instance, Kanai’s earliest short story collection, *Rabbits* (*Usagi*, 1973) provides many instances of young women, or *shōjo*, who possess a strange power and whose bodies are (often repeatedly, often fatally) penetrated.³² Let us take the specific example of the story “Rotting Meat,” with its central female protagonist, a prostitute who narrates using *atashi* (the feminine register of the first-person pronoun *watashi*). Many critics, of course, have already pointed out that the prostitute’s story serves to overturn the masculinist hierarchy that gives rise to the social system of values that in turn creates and that judges her identity.³³ However, carrying with us the insights already gleaned from Kanai’s two essays we might moreover posit that she manages to do this precisely because she lives by an alternative, *cyclical* value system whereby life, now unaccountable for in terms of straightforward linear narrative progression, becomes instead

the process of rotting. The manner in which this decay spreads can additionally, however, be fruitfully read as metaphorical for the way in which a given (corporeal) text might “invade” or infect its readership, thereby creating multiple versions of itself.

The reader is immediately introduced to both *atashi* and the concept of rotting via a frame narrator using *boku* (a masculine first-person pronoun). *Boku*’s framing narrative states unequivocally that he has been forced to leave the prostitute’s apartment at the sight and stench of a bloody lump of rotting meat. The narrative then abruptly shifts to the first-person account of *atashi* herself, as she lists the luxurious presents that were habitually left for her consumption by some of her clients: “[p]retty lace underwear, precious stones, chocolate, silk, perfume, face powder, butter, coffee; I had everything.”³⁴ She then comments that other men left certain items which she keeps for them: “gold watches, jewel incrustated cuff-links, lighters,” and that by looking at these objects she can remember everything about the man they belonged to, how she loved them and how they loved her.³⁵ Still other men just leave her money; however, in such cases the money is tucked under the lamp stand next to her pillow for her to “find” when they have gone. Thus, as all her customers “leave” presents which she then consumes, a cyclical pattern is implemented, so that she, the consumed, consumes that which her customers leave so that she can sustain herself and offer her body for consumption again. That *atashi*’s system offers an alternative model to the binary hierarchies implicit in any patriarchy is highlighted in her phrase, “*Sore de, kurashi o tateteitan desu mono.*”³⁶ Here the word *kurashi* (life) is written in *furigana* over the characters for *seikei* (生計, *lit.* ‘livelihood’) with the verb *tatsu* which both of them are collocated with in *hiragana*, so that the sentence translates simultaneously as “This is how I spent my life/earned a livelihood.” We are thus made to understand that *atashi*’s body is not only the source of her *being*, but also a resource which is gradually “spent” or “consumed” over time. In other words, for her, as for the dancing-girl-in-pain, to live is to realise a cyclical process of “unbeing.” *Atashi*’s lifestyle and its challenge to masculinist social norms is, moreover, thrown into sharp relief by her description of her latest client, the butcher. He creates an imbalance in her life, monopolizing her body so that she is too tired to see other customers, while leaving her the inconvenient and rather tactless present of a whole skinned piglet—tactless because as a transaction in payment for sex it becomes for her an indirect comment on her life, “[a]s if I am selling my body’s meat off one piece at a time.”³⁷ The butcher lives

according to a set of rules derived from a conventional, binary understanding of what the prostitute's body is for. Moreover, the butcher, uncomprehending of the cyclical system of existence that *atashi* has fashioned for herself has failed to understand that his proposal of marriage to her (*shotai o motō*, lit. 'let's set up house') would not only see her cyclical existence destroyed, but would also serve to re-inscribe her as that most secondary of characters, a drab wife (*shotaijimita onna*), in the old, familiar conventional mode of existence called married life. Therefore, that it is the butcher himself who turns out to be the piece of rotting meat encountered by *boku* at the outset of the story means that, with supreme irony, the binary and linear system of signification to which the butcher has previously been in thrall is exposed as an illusion. Indeed, *atashi*'s cyclical value system makes no distinction between the genders; hence, no character in this story is able to escape becoming infected by, or radically transformed into, lumps of rotting meat. Even *boku*, our frame narrator, whose original desire, we later discover, was to acquire his own *ie* (household) and spend his time productively "writing," confesses, after fleeing the woman at the end of the story, his renewed vision of domestic bliss:

But right now what I am looking for is her apartment. In that small furnished apartment where the offensive stench of rotting meat turns the air of the room into a slimy pus, I want to propose to her. I want my body to become a single piece of rotting meat and to be swallowed up by her intestines. Simply imagining this, I am filled with a terribly warm contentment. Recently, however, I have realised that my body has slowly started decaying from my intestines and even my breath is mixed with a halitosis that makes me nauseous.³⁸

Boku's encounter with *atashi* has thus resulted in his being not only affected emotionally in wanting to be digested by her, but infected on a physical level by the rotting meat itself, and this can be seen as a striking metaphor for the way in which the corporeal text operates through the body of the reader to create not only an affective response but a physical re-enactment of the text the reader encounters. Moreover, the way in which the smell of rotting meat is passed from character to character in the story—from the breath of the estate agent which paralyzes *boku*'s nose, to *atashi* whom *boku* discovers in the closet in the middle of the night, to the piglet whose "corpse" we suspect is the source of the smell until we realize it is the butcher's, and finally to *boku*—can be read as metaphorical for the

way in which the corporeal text is passed through its readership's bodies to create multiple re-enactments, re-interpretations, and re-writings. This concept of text as something that is able to transgress the boundaries between the writer and the reader is further reinforced by the story's spatial imagery whereby *atashi*'s rotting meat—as the central image, concept, or theme—is situated at the visual center of the story; under the bed, in the closet, in an apartment which cannot be located by our “framing narrator” *boku*. However, it manages to transgress all of these boundaries by manifesting itself in *boku*'s intestines (in the center of his body) and in his breath, becoming central to his own narrative account of selfhood.³⁹ In turn, we as readers are also invited to imbibe “Rotting Meat,” to digest it, to let it hang in our breath, and to re-understand ourselves through it as we retell it in our own way.

Conclusion

Having offered the above example of how Kanai's early short stories attempt, through various narrative strategies, to resist closure and provide ample opportunity for the reader's own creative interpretation, we should nevertheless be mindful that to try to account for the corporeal text as a tangible, physical commodity—or to enumerate its strategies—is to already have misunderstood it; to have reconfigured it, then re-installed it back within the conventional sociocultural frameworks of literary production, dissemination, and reception; to have re-situated it back into a world of authorial world-views, literary reputations, bookshops, best-seller lists, and professional critical evaluations. The corporeal text, however, evades such restrictive, culturally-determined interpretive and distributive practices, existing only for those moments when it is brought into existence by the act of reading itself. Indeed, it is better to think of “the corporeal text,” not in terms of how it manifests itself through a given text's materiality, but rather, how such a concept informs our own practice of reading and writing. We, as readers, are liberated as to how we assemble and interpret the meanings, images, and associations that we ourselves generate; and it is through the deployment of such meanings, images and associations that not only are gendered determinations overturned, but a given text's corporeality continues to burgeon and thrive.

NOTES

¹ I wish to thank the reviewer who pointed out that Kanai's use of the word *kotoba* (lit. 'word') might be significant in itself as *kotodama* (a related term which Kanai does not use in these essays) are words which embody a spirit. Although there are, undeniably, parallels to be drawn between the two concepts, as I explain more fully later in this article, I have chosen to translate *kotoba* as "text" rather than use the more literal translation of "word(s)" because of its similar ability to refer, not only to "a word," or "words," but also to "a text," or "texts" as the Japanese term.

² Kanai Mieko, "Nikutairon e josetsu dai-ippo", *Gendai shi techō*, 12 (1969), 20–26.

³ Kanai Mieko, "Kotoba/genjitsu/nikutai," in *Obasan no disukūru* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1984), 62–68.

⁴ Kanai Mieko, "Funiku," in *Kanai Mieko zentanpen* Vol 1 (Tokyo: Nihonbungeisha, 1992), 515–521.

⁵ Kanai Mieko, "Nikutairon e josetsu dai-ippo," 20.

⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁷ Hans Christian Andersen, "The Little Mermaid," in *Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales: A Selection*, trans. L. W. Kingsland, intro. Naomi Lewis (Oxford, U. K.: Oxford University Press, 1984) 76–106. A brief synopsis of the story amply demonstrates the link between the physical sensation and pain, and the twin acts of *loving* and *being*. The Little Mermaid falls in love with a handsome prince whom she observes from a distance, aboard his ship. Later, a storm hits and she saves him from drowning, taking him to a sandy beach in front of a temple. He is found by a young woman who lives at the temple; on waking, he does not notice the mermaid, let alone know that she has saved him. The mermaid returns to the kingdom under the sea, but she longs for the prince. She is told that, whereas mermaids can live for three hundred years but dissolve into sea foam at the end of this time, humans have a shorter life span, but an immortal soul. The Little Mermaid, desperate to meet her prince so that he might fall in love with her, goes to ask the Sea-Witch for help. The Sea-Witch tells her that she may exchange her beautiful voice and fish tail for human legs, but that the act of walking will feel as if she is treading upon sharp knives and make her feet bleed. Nevertheless, the mermaid drinks the potion that the sorceress has prepared for her, loses her tail, and grows human legs. The prince finds her and takes her into his care without knowing that it was she who saved his life. She dances for him, even though to do so is excruciating for her. He is charmed by her and grows extremely fond of her, but confesses that he does not want to marry her because he is already in love with the young woman at the temple, who, he believes, saved him from drowning. The mermaid watches the prince marry and feels as if her heart is broken. She is told by her sisters that she may return to being a mermaid if she kills the prince with a knife and lets his blood drip upon her feet.

However, her love for the prince prevents her from doing this; instead, she throws both the knife and herself into the sea, whereupon, instead of dissolving into foam as mermaids usually do, she is raised into the spirit world and given another chance to achieve an immortal soul. For discussions of the many ways in which “The Little Mermaid” has been appropriated both by Japanese and English writers see: Lucy Fraser, “Fairy Tale Transformations and Gender: The Little Mermaid’s Metamorphoses in Japanese and English” (Ph.D. thesis, The University of Queensland, 2013); Lucy Fraser, “Lost Property Fairy Tales: Ogawa Yoko and Higami Kumiko’s Transformations of ‘The Little Mermaid,’” *Marvels & Tales* 27 (2013), 181–93; and Lucy Fraser, “Reading and Retelling Girls across Cultures: Mermaid Tales in Japanese and English,” *Japan Forum* 26 (2014), 246–64.

⁸ Kanai, “Nikutairon e josetsu dai-ippo,” 20.

⁹ Anderson, “The Little Mermaid,” 98.

¹⁰ Kanai, “Nikutairon e josetsu dai-ippo,” 20.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Anderson, 105.

¹³ Kanai, “Nikutairon e josetsu dai-ippo,” 20.

¹⁴ Although Kanai’s essay clearly alludes to her own attendance of Hijikata’s performance (which might, considering the year of the publication of the article, have been his final solo performance), *Nikutai no hanran (Rebellion of the Body)*, 1968), she omits to mention her own participatory forays into the practice of *butō*. We know, however, from the *butō* dancer and choreographer Kasai Akira (a disciple of Hijikata), that he practiced *butō* with Kanai at least twice. His epistolary essay to Kanai (where he mentions these two occasions) is appended in her collected poetry. Kasai Akira, “Sore wa ai ka shi ka soretomo yume ka: Kanai Mieko e no shishin,” in *Kanai Mieko shishū* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1973) 136–44, 141.

¹⁵ Kanai, “Nikutairon e josetsu dai-ippo,” 21.

¹⁶ In “The Wild Swans,” Elisa discovers her eleven brothers have been turned into wild swans by their wicked stepmother. In order to break the spell, and turn her brothers back into handsome princes, she has to pick nettles from the churchyard and bruise them with her feet, regardless of the pain that this causes her. In “The Red Shoes,” a vain and spoilt girl demands that her rich adopted mother buy her a pair of beautiful red shoes. The magic shoes cause her to dance ceaselessly; even after she despairingly has her own feet amputated, the shoes continue to dance and torment her.

¹⁷ *Butō*, its participants, and its contribution to the avant-garde movement are all explored in: Susan Blakely Klein, *Ankoku Butō: The Premodern and*

Postmodern Influences on the Dance of Utter Darkness (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University East Asia Program, 1988 [Cornell East Asia Series, Number 49]); Thomas R. H. Havens, *Radicals and Realists in the Japanese Nonverbal Arts: The Avant-Garde Rejection of Modernism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006); and, more recently, in Bruce Baird, *Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh: Dancing in a Pool of Gray Grits* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), and Miryam Sas, *Experimental Arts in Postwar Japan: Moments of Encounter, Engagement, and Imagined Return* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2011). For a comparatively straightforward biographical account of Hijikata and *butō*, see Stephen Barber, *Hijikata: Revolt of the Body* (London: Creation Books, 2006; later edition Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press [Solar Books imprint], 2010).

¹⁸ Klein, 21.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Sas, 159.

²¹ Ibid., 166.

²² Shibusawa Tatsuhiko, “Zen’ei to sukyandaru” in *Shibusawa Tatsuhiko zenshū* (Tokyo: Kawade shobō, 1993), 356–57, quoted in Sas, *Experimental Arts in Postwar Japan*, 160. In her discussion of Hijikata’s theoretical writings on *butō*, Sas writes extensively on Hijikata’s friendship with Shibusawa Tatsuhiko, the Francophile translator, writer, and literary critic. Shibusawa was also closely associated with Kanai, engaging in head-to-head discussions with her on literature from the 1990s onwards, and has critiqued Kanai’s literary writings.

²³ Kanai, “Nikutairon e josetsu dai-ippo,” 21.

²⁴ Ibid. (my emphasis) I would like to thank the reviewer for this article who pointed out that Kanai makes a distinction in this sentence between “the strange power” of the women and “their roused bodies.” Indeed, in the phrase: *kanojotachi no iyō na chikara ni yotte tsukiugokasareru nikutai* (彼女たちの異様な力によって突き動かされる肉体) it is not clear whose bodies are roused—but simply that it is the power of the women that rouse. Therefore, it could also be translated as: “these women’s strange power and the bodies they rouse,” indicating that the women have the power to rouse the bodies of the readership/audience.

²⁵ Kanai, “Kotoba/genjitsu/nikutai,” 67–68 (original emphasis).

²⁶ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*. trans. Straus and Giroux Farrar, Inc. (Oxford, U. K.: Blackwell Publishers, 1990), 5. The relationship between Kanai and Barthes has been commented upon by Atsuko Sakaki in A. Sakaki, “Breezes through Rooms with Light: Kanai Mieko by Roland Barthes by Kanai Mieko.” *PAJLS*. Vol. 10 (2009), 204–219, 216. Sakaki stresses that the various similarities in

their writings are not due to what Sakaki terms “direct and vertical” influence, as is demonstrable by the fact that they include passages that Kanai had written, that were later closely echoed by Barthes, as well as the other way around, and when neither writer would have had access to the other’s text in a language they could read. Instead, Sakaki concludes, such influence from one to the other is as much due to the natural empathy between the writers (who have broad but similar interests in textiles, photography, and film, etc.) as it is to Kanai’s self-professed deep enjoyment of Barthes works. It is therefore “horizontal,” like “breezes through rooms next to each other.”

²⁷ Barthes, *S/Z*, 5.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ It is important to stress that by “code,” Barthes does not mean a finite and ultimately closed set of interpretive parameters that a more conventional use of the term might imply: “[W]e use *Code* here not in the sense of a list, a paradigm that must be reconstituted. The code is a perspective of quotations, a mirage of structures; we know only its departures and returns; ... they are so many fragments of something that has always been *already* read, seen, done, experienced; the code is the wake of that *already*.” Barthes, *S/Z*, 20.

³⁰ Or in the case of “The Red Shoes,” it is the greedy demands of the girl herself which leads to her suffering.

³¹ In “Ghostly Women, Displaced Femininities and Male Family Romances: Violence, Gender and Sexuality in Two Texts by Nakagami Kenji: Part 1,” *Japan Forum* 8 (1996): 13–34, Livia Monet similarly claims that rape is configured as origin in writing about Nakagami Kenji’s story “Fushi” (The Immortal, 1980) and goes further to join Lynn Higgins (in “Screen/Memory: Rape and Its Alibis in *Last Year at Marienbad*,” in *Rape and Representation*, eds. L. A. Higgins and B. R. Silver (New York: Columbia University Press), 303–21) in arguing that rape can be understood as a founding event of postmodernity. Monet thus argues that as well as positing “woman” as the site of origin and salvation, the rape scene in Nakagami’s “The Immortal” installs a masculinist politics through the text by “inscribing salvation as the implacable hatred and violation of the female body and sexuality.”

³² Perhaps the most notorious of these characters is the rabbit-girl, Sayuri, from the title story of the collection, who learns from her father to enjoy strangling, skinning, and gutting the docile rabbits that he keeps in preparation for the lavish meals they enjoy together. She is later “pierced” and blinded in one eye by the rose-colored glass of her sunglasses, having dressed up as a rabbit for her father who—mistaking her for a monstrous rabbit coming for revenge—throws an alarm clock at her as he dies of a heart attack, smashing the glasses. This incident leads to the rabbit-girl’s blindness and eventual death. Thus, particularly read within the context of the story which, as Mary Knighton writes,

inscribes incest as an “open secret,” she appears at first to hold much in common with the trope of the dancing-girl-in-pain. However, although there is not enough space to argue the case for this here, it is my contention that although this character enacts the fate of the Andersen girls whose lives end in tragedy, the story’s use of dark humor and parody, along with its narrative structure—which installs an external frame around this central narrative—all work to undo any definition of the text as “tragic.” This case can also be argued for the stories “Ai aru kagiri” (As Long as Love Exists, 1971), “Boshizō” (A Figure of Mother and Child, 1972), and “Chimamire Mari-” (Bloody Mary, 1972), which all also feature female bodies that are penetrated, pierced, or cut.

³³ See: Sharalyn Orbaugh, “The Body in Contemporary Japanese Women’s Fiction” in *The Woman’s Hand: Gender and Theory in Japanese Women’s Writing*, eds. P. G. Schalow and J. A. Walker (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996) 119–164, and Mary Knighton, “Writing the Body as Meat: Kanai Mieko’s “Rotting Meat” as Surreal Fable,” in *Japanese Studies Around the World 2004. Observing Japan from Within: Perspectives of Foreign Scholars Resident in Japan*, ed. James Baxter (Kyoto: International Research Center for Japanese Studies, 2004), 161–188.

³⁴ Kanai, “Rotting Meat,” 516.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 517.

³⁸ Ibid., 521.

³⁹ As Knighton points out, “she takes the words (‘rotting meat’) from ‘his’ (the narrator’s) mouth and makes it savor of her own pungently ‘meaty’ presence when, in the end, it is the woman, her ‘smell,’ that takes over the language and the telling of the story itself.” Knighton, 179.